NATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN TASK FORCE

PRESS RELEASE

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SUPREME COURT STRIKES DOWN AMENDMENT 2: "PROFOUND VICTORY FOR PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY"

STATEMENT FROM THE NATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN TASK FORCE

Washington, D.C., May 20, 1996...Today the Supreme Court ruled against Colorado's Amendment 2. The decision was 6 to 3, with Justices Kennedy, Ginsberg, Souter, Breyer, O'Connor, Stevens, ruling against Amendment 2, and Justices Rehnquist, Scalia, and Thomas dissenting. The measure would have amended the Colorado state constitution to overturn existing protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and prohibit the passage of any such protection in the future. It was passed by majority vote in 1992. The following statement is attributable to Melinda Paras, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) executive director. NGLTF is the nation's oldest gay and lesbian civil rights organization.

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The Supreme Court decision today on Colorado's Amendment 2 is a profound victory for all who believe in basic equal rights and the fundamental principle that all Americans deserve to live free from discrimination. It would have created special barriers to basic equal rights. It would have blocked the open and free participation in our democratic process for gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

We commend those justices who defended basic civil rights and stood up to the anti-democratic agenda of religious political extremists. This case was not just about gay, lesbian and bisexual people. At stake are the very principles of democracy: justice, freedom, personal liberty, and the right to be different and still live free from the tyranny of the majority. We are reminded of the words of Justice Blackmun, who in his 1986 dissent to the loathsome *Hardwick v. Bowers* case that upheld discriminatory sodomy laws, said, "The freedom to differ as to things that do not matter much is a mere shadow of freedom. The real test of its substance is the freedom to differ as to the things that touch the heart of the existing order."

Thank you Supreme Court justices for protecting our constitutional freedoms. This is a joyous day for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans. The time is drawing closer when we do not have to live as second-class citizens anymore. When we can live free from violence, persecution, discrimination and intolerance. When the mistruths of religious political extremists are exposed as lies. When the horrible rhetoric that we seek "special rights" or that we threaten "traditional family values" is replaced

with the truth that we demand the same basic equal rights that all Americans enjoy, including the ability to work free from discrimination and nurture our own families.

This ruling should be the stake through the heart of the divisive, unconstitutional and extremist anti-gay ballot measure campaigns of the Radical Right. Last year we defeated a similar measure in Maine. In 1994, despite a Republican sweep in the elections, voters rejected anti-gay measures in Oregon and Idaho. In 1988 and 1992, Oregon defeated yet another measure. In fact, Amendment 2 was the only state anti-gay ballot measure to be passed, even though it never went into effect. Now it too has been struck.

Let this be a message to the sponsors of these bills: The American people do not support your campaigns of intolerance and bigotry. They do not support discrimination against gays, lesbians and bisexuals. They do not want you tying up their courts in costly, prolonged legal battles. They do not want you to come to their communities to destroy and divide. Let this message be heard in every state where voters are considering anti-gay ballot measures in 1996 – on election day this year strike down your anti-gay ballot measures just as the Supreme Court has struck down Amendment 2.

Unfortunately, our victory today may be short-lived. Despite this ruling, the Radical Right will not stop. They are already evolving their measures to make them more difficult to challenge in court, such as the failed attempt in Maine last year that simply "omitted" gay people and others from the list of those protected against discrimination. They are launching other attacks, including anti-education measures that censor the teaching of diversity in public schools, or "parents rights" rhetoric that really tear apart families and communities instead of building stronger ones. Religious political extremists will not stop until they have advanced their broader, anti-democratic, repressive agenda. An agenda that rolls back civil rights for people of color; scapegoats gays, immigrants and others for our country's social and economic problems; and denies women constitutionally protected reproductive freedom.

That's why we call on all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people to remain vigilant. We call on all our families, friends, and neighbors, as well as all Americans of conscience to stand with us as we struggle for basic equal rights. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force launched its "Undo 2: The Supreme Response" campaign last October during hearings on the case. At that time scores of people in more than 35 cities held vigils and rallies to speak up for justice. Today, a similar number of communities were poised for this announcement – and fortunately they are celebrating, not protesting. We must now channel that action into long-term social change.

Today, NGLTF announces a 4-point "Supreme Response" call-to-action plan in the wake of this ruling. We anticipate a backlash from the radical right to this ruling, and must be prepared.

Our Supreme Response campaign will:

(1) Organize events to celebrate the ruling within the next 48 hours. More than 40 cities are already slated to protest. We urge people to join in these actions and make their voices heard.

(2) Call on elected officials in the U.S. Congress and in state and local governments to support comprehensive protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation. We ask them to sign our "Justice for All" resolution and

immediately introduce civil rights laws in the next legislative session. We will work with our grassroots lobbying and NGLTF Cooperating organizations to mobilize a critical mass of support for local and state anti-discrimination measures. We call on President Clinton to lead the charge for federal anti-discrimination protections. President Clinton and other elected officials must do what the Supreme Court justices would not: ensure basic civil rights for gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans.

(3) Gather activists from every state at our Creating Change Conference this November. We'll strategize on how to mobilize our communities and our allies to fight for basic equal rights, respond to the backlash, including fighting state ballot measures and other radical right attacks. Creating Change is the largest conference of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activists in the country.

(4) Launch through our NGLTF web page a "Supreme Response" electronic network to inform and mobilize activists nationwide. Log onto our web page at http://www.ngltf.org to get plugged into actions and information.

This is a momentous day for our movement and for all those who believe in personal liberty, justice and freedom. We are making progress toward ending intolerance and educating America about who we really are. At the same time we know our battle is not over. We must remain on guard and defend against what surely will be a backlash. With today's ruling, we are one important step closer to attaining our dream of a more compassionate and fair society.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is a progressive organization that has supported grassroots organizing and pioneered in national advocacy since 1973. Since its inception, NGLTF has been at the forefront of virtually every major initiative for lesbian and gay rights. In all its efforts, NGLTF helps to strengthen the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender movement at the state level while connecting these activities to a national vision for change.

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